

Visa Offer Gets Cool Welcome From EU

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EU diplomats have poured cold water on an offer by the Foreign Ministry to ease visa rules for Europeans if the liberal visa practices of some European countries are expanded throughout the Schengen zone.

President Dmitry Medvedev has been pushing the European Union to lift visas for Russian citizens, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said last week that he hoped that remaining hurdles to achieve visa-free travel would be removed by the end of this year.

The Russian government is ready to widen its definition of foreign specialists eligible for favorable work and visa conditions if European countries adopt an initiative by Spain to give two-year multiple-entry tourist visas to second-time applicants and five-year multiple-entry visas to third-time applicants from Russia, Vedomosti reported Friday, citing an unidentified Foreign Ministry official.

The official said France and Italy already support the initiative.

Calls to the Foreign Ministry went unanswered Friday.

But European diplomats were quick to dampen any hopes, noting that while some individual Schengen countries issue visas more freely than others, there was no consensus to adopt this more broadly among the 25 members of the open-border agreement.

"This is an issue being discussed and the current practice of some member states," said Denis Daniilidis, spokesman of the EU delegation to Moscow.

Daniilidis said consulates with Schengen member states can individually decide on the length and the type (single- or multi-entry) of visa granted.

Among the countries practicing a more liberal approach are those that profit from tourism from Russia, like Spain and Finland.

Spain put the visa issue at top of the agenda of EU-Russian relations a year ago when it started an initiative to lift all travel restrictions at an undefined future date. While this prompted a new round of talks called the "visa dialogue" last year, other EU members have been wary about opening borders with Russia quickly, some for overt political reasons.

Finland, which has the longest land border with the country of any EU member, holds the record of issuing almost 1 million visas to Russian travelers last year.

Finnish Ambassador Matti Anttonen told The Moscow Times last fall that more than 80 percent of the visas were multi-entry.

Spain issued about 445,000 visas to Russians last year, almost 50 percent more than in 2009, when some 300,000 visas were issued, Spanish Embassy spokesman Fernando Villalba said Friday.

He confirmed that his country was already issuing many multiple-entry and long-term visas, but refused to specify conditions.

"The consulate tries to give longer-term visas when dealing with bona fide travelers," he said by telephone.

Villalba denied the existence of any multi-country initiative, saying only that the Spanish government has long favored making the existing rules more flexible but any reforms must be accompanied by changes on Russia's side.

A French Embassy spokesman also denied the existence of an initiative. But he said France was "actively using the possibilities within the Schengen agreement" to make it easier to get visas for categories like second-time applicants.

Some 300,000 Russians got French visas last year, said the spokesman, Tomas Buffin.

The Italian Embassy did not respond to repeated calls for comment Friday.

While Schengen visas are theoretically valid in every signatory country, travelers are required to enter the Schengen zone via the issuing country. Multi-entry holders can enter the second

time through another country but must ensure that most stamps accompanying the visa are from the issuing country.

Diplomats pointed out that the liberal practices of some Schengen countries are not met by reciprocity from Russian consulates, which rarely give multi-entry visas to tourists.

Daniilidis, of the EU delegation, said the visa dialogue with Moscow would resume by February with a joint elaboration of a “checklist.” According to earlier reports, the checklist could include demands for Russia to enhance border security and abolish cumbersome registration requirements for foreigners.

Lavrov said Thursday that he hoped that the items on the checklist would be resolved by the end of this year. “This is a test for the strategic character of our relations,” he told reporters at his annual news conference.

The political consensus among the 27 EU members has been not to lift visa restrictions for Russians before significant progress has been achieved in visa talks with Ukraine and Georgia, two former Soviet republics that have unilaterally waived visas for EU citizens.

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